



**WOMAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA
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Censor

+ Q&A with director Prano Bailey-Bond

Censor has its roots in the 2015 short *Nasty*, which Prano Bailey-Bond pitched to the BFI Short Film Fund as a pilot for her feature. The BFI funding never came through, but the short progressed nonetheless, becoming a test ground for Bailey-Bond's ideas about the positive power of forbidden cinema. In *Nasty*, a young boy named Doug who is searching for his father finds a family connection through the portal of horror videos – specifically a 'video nasty'-style movie punningly entitled *Evil Dad*. Although the narrative trajectories of *Nasty* and *Censor* are very different, both involve a character longing for a lost loved one, being drawn into the world of the 'nasties' – literally.

'I was exploring the blurred line between fiction and reality,' says Bailey-Bond, who wanted to satirise and invert negative perceptions of horror. 'The key point is that, for me, and indeed for all the horror fans I know, horror isn't vile or evil. In fact it's somewhere that you can find something quite healing and cathartic, and darkly beautiful. So in both films I wanted to subvert the traditional idea of what you can get *from* horror. The popular perception is that these movies are harmful – that they can somehow do bad things to viewers, and therefore need to be cut or banned. But in both *Nasty* and *Censor*, you could say that the horror world *rescues* the central character. In the fiction of the horror world, they can have what they want, when they can't in real life.'

In *Nasty*, Bailey-Bond playfully riffs on a line from Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead*, as the video calls out for Doug to 'join us' – an acknowledgement of the sense of kinship many horror fans experience. As for *Censor*, perhaps the film's most poignant moment comes when the quasi-mythical fictional character the Beastman (Guillaume Delaunay), whom Enid has witnessed committing atrocities on screen, embraces the censor with what seems to be a healing hug. Inspired by the figure of Michael Berryman, who became a horror icon through his starring role in Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), the Beastman 'became a metaphor for the whole "video nasties" phenomenon; something that is dressed up in monstrous form but is actually harmless. It's funny, but as we were shooting that scene, I realised that it's the only time in the film that Enid is held in an almost safe, protective way. It's so beautiful, and so morally weird, because it features a character realising that they are being welcomed by the dark side, and that this place of fantastical horror is actually kinder than the "light side" – the reality in which no one is reaching out to her or comforting her. I think that's why that moment

exists; it was all about the idea that in horror you can find some sort of solace, and I think that's true for a lot of horror fans.'

It was certainly true for me. In an essay entitled 'I was a teenage horror fan', which appeared in the 1997 anthology *III Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, I fondly remembered the late-night horror screenings where I would find myself 'surrounded by other "loners" who, like me, were clearly getting more out of these movies than passing scares, watching them again and again, learning them, studying them.' While writing *Censor*, Bailey-Bond found herself drawn to *III Effects*, particularly to an introductory essay to the Second Edition written by editors Martin Barker and Julian Petley. 'There's a quote in that introduction where they say about horror movies: "What is condemned as 'gratuitous' and 'immoral' is actually experienced by its key fans as *political*.'" That really tied into many of the themes of *Censor*; themes of free will; the function of interpretation; the power to create a personal narrative; and the way that we read films according to what we *want* to see. They go on to say: "There is a strong tendency for press, politicians and pundits to 'name' something as 'violence', to judge it in simplistic moral terms, and thus warrant searches for simple 'causes' (such as 'violent media') of events which happen for a whole variety of complex social and political reasons." Again, that was something I was thinking about in *Censor*, because it's sort of central to the whole idea of the "video nasties" scare.'

To evoke that age of the 'nasties', Bailey-Bond and her team (which included executive-producer/advisor Kim Newman) conjured a series of fictional titles – such as 'Asunder' and 'Don't Go in the Church' – that resembled movies on the aforementioned DPP list of impoundable titles. The key was evoking the aesthetic of films which had been feverishly viewed on VHS and Betamax in the 80s without descending into parody or mimicry – a complicated balancing act that involved a mixture of homage and update. To director of photography Annika Summerson, Bailey-Bond gave a collection of Lucio Fulci films, while cast and crew were asked to study everything from Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), Romano Scavolini's *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain* (aka *Nightmare*, 1981) and Joe D'Amato's *Absurd* (1981) to Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani's *gialli*-inspired 2009 Belgian oddity *Amer*. For Niamh Algar, Bailey-Bond suggested John Hancock's cult offering *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* (1971) and Michael Haneke's sadomasochistic romance *The Piano Teacher* (2001) as touchstones.

Most intriguingly, Bailey-Bond directed sound designer Tim Harrison to the 1978 animation *Watership Down*, having been told by a former censor that the BBFC building was like a rabbit warren – an idea that tickled the director. (Like Disney's *Bambi*, many young viewers still remember that animated Richard Adams adaptation with a mixture of heartbreak and horror). She was similarly struck by the ever-so-slightly seedy ambience of the BBFC's Soho headquarters, full of rooms in which people were watching sex and violence,

while the real treasures were buried in the basement. Former examiners like Carol Topolski offered memories of the process of film censorship, while former BBFC head of communications Catherine Anderson and long-serving compliance officer David Hyman were typically open, helpful and welcoming – a sea-change since the more patrician days of chief censor James Ferman, who ran the organisation from 1975-99. Yet Bailey-Bond is keen to point out that *Censor* is first and foremost a work of fiction, one that very specifically avoids getting bogged down in the exact detail of the ‘nasties’ scare, in which the BBFC was initially bypassed – the very cause of the original panic.

‘We thought about that a lot in terms of when we set the film,’ she says. ‘The thing is that there is just so much annoying history. And we decided that we just had to get away from that: making the films that we talk about fictional; making it “the censor’s office” rather than the BBFC; not really specifying what city we are in; and keeping the exact time-period somewhat vague – it’s a loosely fictional 1985, although we went back and forth between that and ’82-’83 during the development. So we basically created a world in which we could be a bit slidey with facts and history. Because there is a lot of “lore” around the “video nasties”, and specific things that happened at different times. And if you try and stick rigidly to that it just constricts you creatively. And also it’s no fun. Because we’re not making a documentary – we’re making a character journey. And you have to remain focused on how to explore all these ideas, through this character, in an entertaining and meaningful way. You have to bend the facts.’

So, if the film is specifically *not* a recreation of historical fact, what does the central theme of censorship *mean* for Bailey-Bond? ‘It’s to do with the idea that we self-censor traumatic experiences,’ she replies. ‘Enid can’t exactly remember what happened the day her sister disappeared. And in a way, her job becomes a way of exploring that idea of censoring ourselves. We censor to *protect* ourselves; and we also censor to protect others *from* ourselves.’

As for the redemptive power of horror, Bailey-Bond is clear that (as Barker and Petley suggested) ‘there’s a great tendency to just categorise the genre as schlocky – to dismiss it, when actually it is trying to say something complex and intelligent. Horror *is* part of the real world, so if film isn’t “granted permission” to reflect that, are we avoiding facing it as a reality? All the terrible things that have happened throughout history, that get rewritten or covered up – society can’t heal from it, and we can’t process it. On both personal and social levels we kind of need to face the “bad stuff” in life in order to get past it. That’s not a radical thought – it’s why anyone goes for counselling, and hopefully comes out feeling better!’

Mark Kermode, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021

CENSOR

Director: Prano Bailey-Bond
©: Censor Productions Ltd, The British Film Institute,
Channel Four Television Corporation, Ffilm Cymru Wales
Production Company: Silver Salt Films
Produced in association with: Kodak Motion Picture, Cinelab London
Presented by: BFI, Film4, Ffilm Cymru Wales
International Sales: Protagonist Pictures
Executive Producers: Andy Starke, Ant Timpson, Kim Newman,
Naomi Wright, Lauren Dark, Ollie Madden, Daniel Battsek, Mary Burke,
Kimberley Warner
Produced by: Helen Jones
Written by: Prano Bailey-Bond, Anthony Fletcher
Director of Photography: Annika Summerson
Editor: Mark Towns
Production Designer: Paulina Rzeszowska
Costume Designer: Saffron Cullane
Original Music by: Emilie Levienaise-Farrouch
Sound Designer: Tim Harrison

Cast

Niamh Algar (Enid Baines)
Nicholas Burns (Sanderson)
Vincent Franklin (Fraser)
Sophia La Porta (Alice Lee)
Adrian Schiller (Frederick North)
Clare Holman (June)
Andrew Havill (George)
Felicity Montagu (Valerie)
Danny Lee-Wynter (Perkins)
Clare Perkins (Anne)
Guillaume Delaunay (Beastman)
Richard Glover (Gerald)
Michael Smiley (Doug Smart)

UK 2020
84 mins

Courtesy of Vertigo Releasing



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IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Censor + Q&A with director Prano Bailey-Bond
Thu 1 Jul 20:45
Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI
Mon 5 Jul 18:00
African Odysseys Present: European Premiere: The Milkmaid + Q&A with writer-director Desmond Ovbiagele and producer Oluseun Sowemimo
Sat 10 Jul 14:00
Black Lens Festival Opening Night: UK Premiere: How to Stop a Recurring Dream + Q&A with director Ed Morris and actor Ruby Barker
Fri 16 Jul 18:00
Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Girlfriends
Fri 16 Jul 18:15

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Member Picks: Rumble Fish
Fri 2 Jul 17:30
Projecting the Archive: Trottie True (aka The Gay Lady) + intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting
Tue 6 Jul 18:00
Silent Cinema: Nell Gwyn + intro by BFI Curator Bryony Dixon
Sun 18 Jul 15:30
Seniors’ Free Archive Matinee: Cabin in the Sky + intro by writer Marcus Powell
Mon 19 Jul 14:00
Experimenta: Born in Flames + discussion
Thu 22 Jul 18:00
Relaxed Screening (tbc)
Tue 27 Jul 18:00
Terror Vision:
Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things
Thu 29 Jul 21:00

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